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SUBJECT: LISBON TREATY REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN BEGINS TO WARM UP IN IRELAND

REF: (A) DUBLIN 219

(B) DUBLIN 186 and Previous

(C) Dublin 169 and Previous

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Summary

¶1. The pace of campaigning for the June 12 Lisbon Treaty referendum has begun to warm up, as the Irish Referendum Commission announced the launch of its public awareness campaign. A poll released on April 27 has the referendum vote too close to call. However, Prime Minister-elect Brian Cowen declared on April 29 that the government would support the Treaty "vigorously." Once Cowen is installed as Prime Minister on May 7, campaigning will surge. We expect that public opinion will shift toward 'Yes' as the referendum date draws nearer and the main political parties bring their clout into play in support of the Treaty. End summary.

Referendum Commission Launches Campaign

¶2. The Irish Referendum Commission (an independent statutory body set up to ensure fairness of public expenditure in referendums, promote public awareness of referendums, and encourage the electorate to vote) launched its public awareness campaign on the Lisbon Treaty on April 28. An information website (www.lisbontreaty2008.ie) has been set up to explain the main details of the document. More than two million informational handbooks will be delivered to every voting household in the coming weeks. Advertisements have been placed in the media ahead of the government's official campaign, which will commence on May 12. At the launch of its campaign, the Referendum Commission stressed its view that Ireland will continue to be able to veto demands by European Union member states for changes to its corporate taxes if the Lisbon Treaty is passed.

¶3. Public interest in the Treaty debate has heightened, with a sharp increase in media coverage of Treaty and referendum issues, including radio and television programs, newspaper articles, op-eds, and letters to the editor. In addition, a series of senior European leaders have visited Ireland recently to talk up the Treaty, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

Polls Have It "Too Close to Call"

¶4. As the Lisbon Treaty referendum campaign shifts into higher gear in the run-up to the June 12 referendum, a poll published in the April 27 Sunday Business Post showed that the margin between the

'Yes' and 'No' sides in the campaign had narrowed to four points. The poll recorded support for the Treaty at 35 percent, with 31 percent of those surveyed opposed. With six weeks to go before the vote, the number of undecided voters remains high, at 34 percent. The results also suggested that a majority of farmers now oppose the Treaty because of their concerns about World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations (Ref A).

¶15. A separate survey by the Referendum Commission has found a very low level of understanding about the Lisbon Treaty among the public, with 80 percent of respondents saying they did not understand the Treaty. On April 28, Ireland's EU Commissioner Charlie McCreevy told the press that the poll result should act as a wake-up call to the 'Yes' side, and said that there will be a "big battle" to convince the Irish electorate to vote in favor of the Treaty.

Those in Favor ...

¶16. Those calling for a 'Yes' vote, including all the political parties (with the exception of Sinn Fein) say the Treaty is good for Ireland, good for Europe, and good for Ireland in Europe. Supporters stress that the purpose of the Treaty is to streamline the legislative process in European institutions, and that the EU's democratic accountability will be improved by the Treaty.

¶17. Key Irish leaders are speaking out in support of the Treaty, highlighting the many benefits Ireland has received from the EU since joining in 1973. On April 27, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern issued a stark warning on the consequences of rejecting the Treaty, stating that a 'No' vote would have "repercussions that would do immense damage to Ireland," and would be a "disaster for the country."

... and those Opposed

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¶18. The opponents of the Treaty, however, claim the Treaty will undermine workers' rights, usher in a European super-state with a military dimension (which will conflict with Ireland's long-standing policy of military neutrality), damage the interests and role of small member states like Ireland, and hurt Ireland's farmers by reducing farm subsidies. They claim Ireland will lose its veto in a number of areas, including corporate taxation (where it currently holds a competitive advantage within the EU), and that the Treaty will create a de facto constitution, comprising more than 90 percent of the substance of the EU Constitutional Treaty, which was rejected by the people of the Netherlands and France in 2005.

Comment

¶19. The government hasn't really started its campaign yet; the pace of campaigning is therefore only warming up. However, Prime Minister-elect Brian Cowen declared on April 29 that the government would support the Treaty "vigorously." Once Cowen is installed as Prime Minister on May 7, and has announced his Cabinet, we expect to see a major surge in campaigning. Meanwhile, a significant potential impediment to the passage of the Treaty - the danger that Irish voters would vote 'No' on the Treaty as a protest vote against outgoing Taoiseach Bertie Ahern - has disappeared with Ahern's announced resignation (Ref B). Although the recent polling figures make it appear - at the moment - that the referendum vote is too close to call, we expect that public opinion will shift toward 'Yes' as the main political parties bring their clout into play in support of the Treaty. It remains to be seen, however, whether Ireland's political parties will be able to translate any increase in support of the Treaty into actual turnout on referendum day.

FAUCHER